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ABSTRACT

Noting that previous research on avoidance fails to explain adequately the forces behind reading or not reading, a study examined the avoidance gratifications of southern Illinois newspaper readers and nonreaders. Data for the study were collected during the course of a more general newspaper readership survey in Carbondale. In telephone interviews, 408 subjects described their newspaper usage. Almost 15% of the sample identified themselves as not usually reading a newspaper, a figure that nearly tripled when subjects were asked if they had read a paper the day of the interview. Three groups were developed from the responses: nonreaders, casual readers, and regular readers. The groups used a three-point scale to rate 12 avoidance statements, which included the following: (1) reading a newspaper is too time consuming, (2) newspaper stories are biased and untrustworthy, (3) newspapers have too much advertising, (4) most newspaper news has already been heard from other media, and (5) newspapers have little of interest related to daily life. Overall, nonreaders responded with significantly higher levels of agreement to these avoidance statements, education was the only significant demographic variable, and nonreaders tended to have only a high school education or less. Factor structures suggest that different patterns of cognition exist for readers and nonreaders, and that perceptions of newspapers by nonreaders are not as clear as those of readers. (HTH)

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A CLOSER LOOK AT AVOIDANCES: Are readers different from nonreaders?

by

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Despite an almost constant attention in recent years to the uses and gratifications approach to the study of the receivers of mass media since Blumer and Katz (1974), relatively small amounts of data are available on so-called "avoidance" items.

Becker (1979) perhaps has provided the most conceptual analysis to date. Using factor analysis he found a cluster of what was termed "avoidance motivations of various sorts." In this framework avoidances measured were not mirror-opposites of gratifications.

The focus in uses and gratification literature has in recent years turned toward an expectancy-value approach used by Palmgreen and Rayburn (1984), the use of dependancy theory (Wenner 1983), or evolutionary empirical models as the one employed by McLeod et al.(1982). These models attempt to extend previous efforts by adapting the theory to a more

cognitive perspective. In this connection the work of Fishbein (1963) on attitudes and beliefs and Vroom (1964) on motivation are important in development of theory. As Swanson (1979) has pointed out, "commitment to addressing conceptual issues may thus be read, without overstating the case too strongly, as one sign of the field's maturation." The *refining* of a useful model, however, has sometimes been hampered by an ambiguity of concepts. Further, understanding a more complete picture of the uses and gratifications paradigm may be difficult, if not impossible, without a stronger conceptualization of what avoiding mass media means to the receiver.

Early work on avoidances was primarily limited to a discussion of the demographic patterns of the newspaper non-reader. Westley and Severin (1964) found that nonreaders were generally very young or old, living in rural areas, and of lower income, educational or occupational status. A similar study a decade later by Penrose (1974) found that the number of nonreaders appeared to be increasing, but their demographic characteristics were essentially the same. The North Carolina survey showed income and education were important variables in describing the newspaper nonreader. It should be possible to go beyond simple demographic data analysis of the newspaper nonreader.

Poindexter (1979) pursued the question: "Why don't non-readers read newspapers?" Lack of time, use of another medium, cost and lack of interest apparently all played a part in the decision by the receiver. A list of fifteen

avoidance items were reduced to five factors: 1) Newspaper content; 2) Use of other media; 3) Poor eyesight; 4) Bias; and 5) Lack of time. The study suggested that there are two groups of nonreaders: Typical (young or old, poor and under-educated) and "atypical" nonreaders not fitting the categorical definitions.

Much of the work done on avoidance has centered on the non-reader with not enough comparative data. Analysis sometimes has made the assumption that regular users of mass media do not have their own special avoidances, whether that be toward types of news stories, sections of the newspaper, or more generally types of mass media which may use color, pictures, the written or the spoken word.

The study of avoidances may also have its place in consideration of administrative mass media questions. Research on the presumed poor health of newspapers suggests it may be the psychological health rather than business that is poor. Skylar (1984) reports that the $18 billion in annual revenues are more than radio and television combined. Newspaper readership has declined while magazine and paperback book sales soar.

One answer to this may be found in work done on readability. Fowler and Smith (1979) found that over time magazines appear to be easier to read than newspapers. There may be a connection then between the ability to read comfortably, socialization, motivation, and the significance of education as a predictor variable in the nonreader model.

Previous work on avoidance fails to explain adequately the forces behind reading or not reading the newspaper. Exploratory work on the more general issue of mass media avoidance would be helpful, especially since other media have been shown to be significant in the avoidance of the newspaper.

This study attempts to advance the work on avoidance of mass media. It is hoped that some perspective can be brought to the avoidance gratification paradigm in a way that will suggest more sophisticated questions in future research.

METHOD

Data for the study were collected during the course of a more general newspaper readership survey in Carbondale, Illinois. By telephone, 408 persons were questioned about their newspaper usage. Almost fifteen percent of the sample identified themselves as not usually reading a newspaper (n=60). When asked if they had read a newspaper today, the number of nonreaders jumped (n=174). Three groups were developed from the two sets of responses (nonreaders, casual readers, and regular readers).

1) **Nonreaders** said they usually do not read a newspaper and had not read one on the day questioned.

2) **Casual readers** said they usually read a newspaper but had not read one the day questioned.

3) **Regular readers** said they usually read a newspaper and had read one the day they were questioned.

Twelve avoidance statements were rated by the group in the sample. A three point scale of agreement was used to determine whether the reason applied (3 = a lot, 2 =

somewhat, or 1 = not at all). The questions were read:

"Here are some reasons people have given for not reading newspapers or for not reading very often. Do they apply a lot, somewhat, or not at all? One reason people have given is..."

The reasons were then listed.

- It takes too much time to read a newspaper regularly.
- Newspapers don't print much of interest to me.
- Newspapers cost more than they are worth to me.
- Newspaper stories are too one-sided and biased.
- You cannot trust what you read in most newspapers.
- Newspapers have too much advertising.
- Newsapers generally are poorly written.
- Most stories in newspapers are difficult to read.
- There is not much in newspapers that is useful to me in my daily life.
- There is too much detail in most newspaper stories.
- By the time I see a story in a newspaper, I've already heard about it from radio or television.
- Most newspapers are not very attractive or easy to look at.

Analysis in this report is segmented into three stages. First, mean score ratings are compared between readers and nonreaders on the avoidance statements. Second, the three groups are compared on demographic terms. Third, factor structures are developed.

RESULTS

Analysis of variance was used to test for significant differences between readers and nonreaders on the avoidance items. Overall, nonreaders responded with significantly

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higher levels of agreement. Only "already heard on radio or television" leaned toward strong agreement by nonreaders.

TABLE 1. Mean scores for Readers and NonReaders on Avoidance.

ITEM	n	NonReader (55)	Casual (119)	Usual (229)	TOT (403)	F	PROB>F
1. Radio-TV		2.44*	1.90	1.99	2.02	11.211	0.0000
2. Cost		2.09*	1.47	1.49	1.56	15.772	0.0000
3. Usefulness		2.00*	1.34	1.35	1.44	26.648	0.0000
4. Time		1.84	1.61*	1.32	1.48	17.576	0.0000
5. Interest		1.84*	1.38	1.34	1.42	16.303	0.0000
6. Trust		1.83*	1.47	1.49	1.53	7.423	0.0007
7. Advertising		1.76	1.55	1.61	1.61	1.517	NS
8. Attractive		1.76	1.50	1.51	1.54	3.506	0.0310
9. Bias		1.72	1.62	1.65	1.65	0.439	NS
10. Details		1.50*	1.29	1.22	1.28	5.944	0.0029
11. Writing		1.45	1.50	1.42	1.44	0.713	NS
12. Reading		1.31	1.19	1.18	1.20	1.951	NS

The Scheffe procedure was utilized in the ANOVA. In all but one case, (no.8 attractive) a significant F value indicates that there are two significant pairs of differences.

On six of the avoidance items, nonreaders were significantly different from both groups of readers. When it came to use of radio-TV, cost, usefulness, interest, trust and the amount of detail in the newspaper, nonreaders were in higher levels of agreement with the avoidance statements.

On only one item, time (*"It takes too much time to read a newspaper regularly"*), casual readers were significantly different from the usual reader. The casual reader rated the avoidance statement with a significantly higher level of agreement.

On only one item, attractive (*"Most newspapers are not very attractive or easy to look at."*), nonreaders were significantly different from regular readers, but not from the casual reader.

There is another aspect to the avoidance question. Avoidance, in some cases, may exist for readers, whether they be casual or regular. In this study if a respondent said s/he read only one of the two local newspapers (the *Southern Illinoisan* or the *Daily Egyptian*) then an open-ended question was asked: *"Is there any special reason you do not read the _____?"* The answers among nonreaders in each case were quite different. In each case more than 100 responses were obtained.

TABLE 2. Reasons for not reading the two local newspapers.

Southern Illinoisan	n	%	Daily Egyptian	n	%
1.Content	31	24.2	1.Availability	50	37.6
2.Cost	29	22.7	2.Interest	46	34.6
3.Read other	24	18.7	3.Chance only	18	13.5
4.Time	21	16.4	4.Time	14	10.5
5.Watch TV	7	5.5	5.All others	5	3.8
6.AM Change	5	3.9	total		
7.Availability	4	3.1		133	100.0
8.All others	5	5.5			
total					
	128	100.0			

Local factors may play a role in "avoiding the newspaper." In the case of the student-operated newspaper, for example, no charge distribution eliminates cost as a factor. But, limited off-campus distribution makes availability most important.

In the case of the *Southern Illinoisan* a recent change from afternoon to morning publication was mentioned by some people as a reason for not reading that newspaper. Fowler (1985) found that the newspaper reading habit may adjust over time to such a change.[1]

Overall, interest in the content of the newspaper was a major response in this phase of the questioning. However, it is important to note that these results may be specific to the role of a campus paper in a college town.

DEMOGRAPHICS

In past research much has been made of demographic differences between readers and nonreaders of newspapers. It has been reported that nonreaders tend to be very young or old, of lower income levels, from rural areas, and with less formal education.

In the present study gender, urban/rural status, employment status and marital status were not significant in describing differences. Education was a significant consideration and age displayed limited explanatory power.

TABLE 3. Years of formal education for readers and non-readers.

		0-12	13+	TOT
NonReaders	n	36	19	55
	%	65.5	34.5	13.7
Casual Readers	n	31	88	119
	%	26.1	73.9	29.5
Readers	n	68	161	229
	%	29.7	70.3	56.8
totals	n	135	268	403
	%	33.5	66.5	100.0

Chi Squared = 30.653; 5df; $p < .01$.

Nonreaders tended to have a high school education or less. This group was less likely to have a higher education

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of any kind.

The data on age are helpful in making some descriptive distinctions between the readers and nonreaders of newspapers.

Unlike data reported in the past, the nonreader was not very young or old. Casual readers tended to be younger.

TABLE 4. Number and Proportion of Respondents in Each Age Classification for Readers and NonReaders.

		0-25	26-56	57+	TOTAL
Nonreaders	n	17	21	17	55
	%	30.9	38.2	30.9	13.6
Casual readers	n	48	57	14	119
	%	40.3	47.9	11.8	29.6
Regular readers	n	62	94	73	229
	%	27.1	41.0	31.9	56.8
totals	n	127	172	104	403
	%	31.5	42.7	25.8	100.0

Chi Squared = 18.459, 8df, $p < .05$

The results suggest further clarification of the "non-reader" and "casual reader" is needed. Stamm (1985) has considered the relationship between community ties and readership. In this regard age differences might be explained by relocation of younger people to a relatively isolated college town.

FACTOR STRUCTURE

Factor analysis[2] was used to construct cognitive patterns among avoidance items for the three readership groups. In the Poindexter study previously mentioned, a five factor solution was developed for nonreaders (content, media, eyesight,

bias,and time).

In the present study the avoidance items were analyzed for structure. Two items, time and advertising, did not correlate with any other item and were not included in the secondary analysis. Casual and regular readers were combined for the factor analysis.[3] Analysis of casual readers was not helpful and suggests that a more clearly defined concept is needed.[4]

TABLE 5. Factor Analysis of Avoidances for NonReaders.

Avoidances	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1. Interest	**.65**	.06	.35
2. Cost	**.55**	.26	.21
3. Bias	.30	.00	**.75**
4. Trust	.51	.34	**.79**
5. Writing	.29	.22	**.62**
6. Reading	.25	**.95**	.21
7. Useful	**.89**	.30	.45
8. Detail	.19	**.59**	.19
9. Radio-TV	**.58**	.10	.31
10.Attractiveness	.34	.31	**.48**

Nonreaders had a clear utility factor which included interest in stories, cost of the publication, usefulness of the information and timeliness relative to radio and television reports. Readers shared a similar utility factor.

A second clustering for the nonreader developed around difficulty of news stories and detail of information. The credibility questions of bias and trust were lumped with poor newspaper writing and attractiveness of the paper.

However, for readers the divisions were clear. A factor clustered about credibility, with bias of news stories and trust of information included. Another factor for readers was evaluative in nature including difficulty of news stories

to read, poor writing, detail of stories and attractiveness. A utility factor also existed for readers in reasoning about avoidance items.

TABLE 6. Factor Analysis of avoidances for readers.

Avoidances	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1. Interest	.61	.34	.39
2. Cost	.55	.27	.26
3. Bias	.36	.61	.31
4. Trust	.34	.75	.33
5. Writing	.30	.42	.52
6. Reading	.37	.31	.68
7. Useful	.75	.27	.41
8. Detail	.47	.17	.51
9. Radio-TV	.33	.16	.22
10. Attractiveness	.45	.21	.48

DISCUSSION

Clearly the newspaper nonreader is different from the reader in terms of perception of the newspaper.

There may be subtle differences between the regular and casual reader, although a specific methodological design will be required to explain much about this.

Beyond the significant differences in amounts of formal education and age, demographics were not very useful in highlighting the differences between readers and nonreaders. It is possible that some of the significant differences described in past work may be impacted by longitudinal changes. It is obvious that lifestyles of Americans have changed over the decades. It is possible that the two income household, higher unemployment rates, and an aging society, to name a few changes, may be important. Television news

viewing, fewer afternoon newspapers, and changes to morning publication may be important in understanding nonreaders. In the context of Stamm's observations on community and communication, changing places and spaces may be important.

Factor structures suggest that different patterns of cognition exist for readers and nonreaders. Both groups share common but not identical structures on utility items. Psychological data might be helpful in telling us something more substantial about the motivations behind reading or not reading the newspaper. The factor structures suggest that perceptions of newspapers by nonreaders are not as clear as those by readers.

Past conceptualization on the "atypical" nonreader is not at all clear and more work needs to be done to define this. As Becker has said, avoidance gratifications appear to be neither mirror-opposites nor separate factors.

Clarification of attitude and belief patterns for readers and nonreaders may provide more insight into the understanding of avoidance gratifications.

It takes too much time to read a newspaper? Is this a function of the activity of the receiver, or is the person really saying there is nothing in the paper that is worth my time relative to other activities? The answer to this question is important if we are to understand the differences between casual and regular readers, if there are any.

Admittedly, one of the weaknesses in this type of research has been the problem of clearly defining the concepts of "readers" and "non-readers." It may be more a case of levels

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of media use which could be discovered through more intensive questioning. The habitual or ritualized reader should be studied further.

The conceptualization of a "casual" reader poses even more problems. There is the measurement problem of determining how to quantify newspaper readership. Number of days per week of reading, number of papers read, number of stories read, type of stories read, recall ability, and long-term memory of content may all be useful in development of stronger definitions.

We might also imagine there is a group of "heavy" readers displaying different patterns from regular readers. It is clear that simple use of "reader" compared to "nonreader" is not adequate for future research on avoidance.

Clarification of the meaning of "avoidances" would also be helpful. We need to use factors, such as utility, credibility, and physical description of newspapers to design research that probes more deeply.

It seems difficult to imagine uses and gratifications research progressing substantially without a more developed conceptualization of avoidance gratification.

It seems clear that the area of avoidance is worth more attention by scholars than has previously been given. More sophisticated research might well yield a better understanding of the motivations, both reward and punishment, involved in mass media use by the receiver.

NOTES

1
For a more complete discusssion of the impact of a pm-am conversion see Rarick, Galen R. and James B. Lemert (1986),"Subscriber Behavior and Attitudes in Response to PM-AM Conversion," **Newspaper Research Journal**, 7:11-18.

2
A rotated oblique solution in SPSS FACTOR. Correlations between factors one and two were - .47. Correlations between factors one and three were .48. Correlations between factors two and three were .42. The results are not statistically significant. The solution provided is orthogonal in nature.

3
Analysis of casual readers yielded a one factor solution based upon an Eigenvalue of 1.00 or greater. 57.1 percent of the variance was explained by usefulness, interest, details and cost. A meaningful three factor solution was extracted when casual and regular readers were combined.

4
Only by combining casual readers with the larger group of readers could a comparative analysis be conducted. The results do not provide insight into whether or not there are perceptual differences between readers with different habits.

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